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ABSTRACT

The Iowa Higher Education Facilities Commission and the Office of New Degree Programs designed a study with five missions: (1) to identify who the nontraditional learners are and define their learning needs; (2) to inventory all of the unusual educational services already in place; (3) to recommend ways of informing the public more fully about opportunities that now exist; (4) to determine what additional or alternative educational delivery systems might be needed; and (5) to evaluate a proposal for a new type of degree program which was put forward in 1973. Survey instruments were used to conduct a statewide, demographically-based interview field poll, along with an extensive interview system and reviews of similar studies. Extensive results and recommendations were reported. It was concluded that results show that the post secondary institutions in Iowa are excellent, numerous, and of high quality, but heavily oriented to the traditional, full-time younger person who is embarking upon his or her career. However, as the demand for on-campus study decreases, resources must be gradually reallocated to accommodate mature learners. (HAB)

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THE THIRD CENTURY

Postsecondary Planning for the Nontraditional Learner[1]

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May, 1976

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

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Summary

"I really feel that all people at all times should have access to educational opportunities. Men, women, young, old and anyone else who wishes to learn or makes a committment to want to learn should have the opportunity. All modes of communication should be used and all segments of life and living problems should be offered."

--- Ottumwa Housewife

This quotation drawn from our study has come to symbolize the beliefs and attitudes most adult residents of Iowa hold toward the state's educational institutions. It is a relatively old belief, one that has been explicitly accepted by Americans in our long-cherished ideal of universal education. In recent decades that ideal has been extended to include many forms of education beyond high school -- now often referred to as postsecondary education -- in the expansion of our fine system of higher education, both public and private, and articulated through such new types of institutions as community colleges, technical and trade schools, professional institutes, extension and continuing education programs, and most recently "external" degree opportunities. All of these stem from

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[1] A study completed by the Office of New Degree Programs, a joint activity of the College Entrance Examination Board and The Educational Testing Service, for the Higher Education Facilities Commission of the State of Iowa.

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our basic belief as a people that education is a right for all, not a privilege to be enjoyed only by an elite class of citizens.

What is new, and indeed unique in modern history, is the rapidly changing characteristics of the American population -- our demography. The celebrated "baby boom" following the second world war produced a marked increase in the number of people born between 1945 and 1955 from what normally would have been expected had no war intervened. The bulge in the population during those years was followed by the broad diffusion of contraceptives in the 1960's which, among other causes, led to a steep decline in the American birth rate continuing unabated up to the present, producing a deep depression in the "normal" pattern of births. This "ski jump" effect has major consequences for all of our social institutions, including of course our schools. In the mid-1970's we now have many people who are 20 to 30 years old, and relatively fewer who are younger, the group from which our college-going students will come in the next two decades.

This fact of our national life was accompanied by a transformation of our educational system: rapid expansion of our institutions to cope with the boom in the 1960's and early 1970's followed by contraction in our primary and secondary schools as the slackening in numbers moves inexorably upward. Will this same contraction continue in our postsecondary institutions, our schools and colleges which were so rapidly built to educate the young? Will the magnificent school and college buildings erected by the taxpayers become vacant? Will our excellent faculties be let go?

Perhaps. One cannot say for certain. Some changes will of necessity occur. The tranquil campuses filled with only the young will undoubtedly become harder to find as the years pass. But because of several converging factors it appears increasingly unlikely that our labors in the 1960's will come to nothing in the 1980's. What are some of these factors?

First, educational researchers and innovators found that high quality education is possible to achieve outside of the usual assumptions of time (two or four years of two semesters each), place (on the campus), and typical student (the young). It could equally well be achieved in more or less time, according to the intensity of the instruction, the swiftness of mind of the learner, and his or her competing responsibilities. It could be achieved in many locations: in a local grammar school building or hometown learning center, in a library, on the job, or indeed, while at home. We now know that external degree programs can provide for excellent learning. And it could be achieved among many types of people whom hitherto had not been considered "appropriate" students: working adults and mothers, isolated or handicapped persons, minorities, those seeking a new life -- in short, the "men, women, young, old and anyone else" our Ottumwa housewife referred to. "Age is no barrier to learning", a sage once said, but if one looks at most of our institutions one would conclude that this fact is not well recognized. These new students and potential new students are what we call the "nontraditional learner".

A second factor is also something of a discovery: the conditions of modern life in America do not permit one to stop learning. Jobs and attitudes become obsolete more in a complex, technology-based economy. The world community shrinks daily as telecommunications bring remote events into the home. Our personal success in coping with life depends upon understanding and skill in dealing with economic, social, political and psychological realities around us. Thus, the bulge in the population now in their twenties and thirties are not through with their education. Most will never be full-time students again, but many will use their spare time learning a variety of things each feels is important to his or her own well being.

The third factor is more complex, but relates to the other two. It is the current state of uncertainty in the population, uncertainty with respect to jobs, energy resources, our role as a people -- indeed, a host of uncertainties brought on in part because of the rapidly changing world. The uncertain economy may prompt some people to seek alternate occupational abilities; the uncertain future of the nuclear family prompts others to seek greater understanding of social change; still a third group is uncertain about the availability of services and hope to become more self-reliant through acquisition of technical skills and abilities. The effect of uncertainty is to snowball the demand for educational services, a phenomenon which can clearly be seen nationally in rapidly rising numbers of adults who are part-time learners. For the first time ever there are more part-time postsecondary students in the United States than there are full-time students, and indications are that this trend will continue.

The Study

In part because of a recognition of these circumstances, the Higher Education Facilities Commission (HEFC)[2] asked the Office of New Degree Programs (ONDP) to design a study with five missions: (1) to identify who the nontraditional learners are in Iowa and define their learning needs, (2) to inventory all of the unusual educational services already in place in Iowa to serve these people, (3) recommend ways of informing the public more fully about opportunities that now exist, (4) determine what additional or alternative educational delivery systems might be needed, and (5) evaluate a proposal for a new type of degree program which was put forward in 1973.

To accomplish these objectives, the study team adapted successful survey instruments developed for the Commission on Nontraditional Study in 1972 and conducted a statewide, demographically-based interview field poll, an inventory of programs in Iowa post-secondary institutions designed for the nontraditional learner, a survey of currently enrolled nontraditonal students, and a series of group interviews in a number of cities and towns throughout Iowa. In addition, the team reviewed similar studies and events in other states to determine what results and ideas might be useful to Iowa planners. While pursuing these activities, members of the study team were advised and assisted by an Advisory

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[2] The HEFC is Iowa's official planning agency for postsecondary education.

Committee representing all types of postsecondary institutions and appointed by the HEFC.

Study results

There are many specific findings that will be useful to educational planners in the next years that will not be reported in this summary. Those findings have important implications for Iowa's institutions and programs, and should be seriously considered, debated, and confirmed through subsequent studies. However, there are some major findings that will be outlined in this section. They deal with the first two study objectives in turn.

Nontraditional students. There are two-thirds of a million Iowans 18 and older who would like to take further advantage of learning opportunities at various times in their lives; over 450,000 of them feel that they cannot do so now because of a variety of barriers, including the lack of an appropriate program or realistic opportunity. Two-thirds of these potential adult students are women who reside in all communities and regions in the state. The majority are younger (20 to 35), hold jobs or have a growing family, and tend to have middle class incomes. A good portion of these persons have had some postsecondary learning experience already, and feel they need more. They come from all sectors of the Iowa population, but few of the over 65 age group, and few of those who are poor or have less than a high school education are among them. These groups do not feel that further education can help them.

Potential new students want to learn more for a variety of reasons, most relating to the uncertainty about the future referred to earlier, but some for personal reasons of self-development, to take maximum advantage of their potential. The wide range of subjects wanted reflects these diverse reasons. About a third want to learn vocational skills, many for a job but some to become more independent and self-reliant. Because many nontraditional learners already have college degrees, about a quarter look to professional and other graduate subject matter fields to further their contribution in life. Self-development subjects such as home and family living topics, public affairs, recreation, hobbies, and personal development are important to a portion of the potential new learners.

In terms of numbers it is estimated that currently over 100,000 adult Iowans would like to learn business skills, more about child development or home crafts, for example, and over 50,000 persons would like to know more about agriculture, education, engineering, industrial trades, nursing or technical skills.

Most of these potential new learners are not seeking credit or degrees, but among the approximately 200,000 adults who are, about half are aiming at a graduate or professional degree , generally on a part-time basis that does not require extensive residence on a university campus. For the over 25 adult, traditional residential

study is near impossibility. With few opportunities for part-time graduate study available, however, those persons' ambitions are frustrated.

Adults as a group differ in important ways from traditional students, and demand that programs for their benefit be designed with their needs clearly in mind. Those who are able are willing to pay the cost of their further education themselves, but they must receive that education near their place of residence, at a time and place convenient to them, and under adult learning conditions. The average adult in the survey is willing to pay over $1,000 for an appropriate learning activity. Because they have seen and experienced more in life than a typical 18 year old, adults want that experience taken into account as they approach further study, however. Almost 200,000 Iowans want individual educational information, counseling, or personal assessment of their current knowledge and potential for further growth.

The barriers faced by potential nontraditional learners are those encountered by any person who has typical adult responsibilities: logistical constraints, lack of time or energy, or costs beyond their means. For some, these barriers have been overcome by a combination of luck (in their place of residence), and perseverance.

Learning opportunities. Over the last fifteen years there has been a steady increase in the number and variety of learning

opportunities for the type of student we call the nontraditional learner. The state universities and some private colleges have large and successful extension, continuing education or adult programs with a larger enrollment today than ever before.

By far the most dramatic new set of opportunities has arisen through the programs of adult, career, and vocational education in the public area community colleges and vocational schools. Of the over 250,000 adult Iowans who were enrolled in at least on educatonal program in 1975, 17 out of every 20 attended one of these institutions or an outreach learning center organized by an area institution. The programs run by these schools are convenient for many adults, relatively inexpensive, and enjoy a wide popularity among the younger nontraditional learners.

These programs are quite unevenly distributed across the State, however, and even in the better served areas are meeting less than half the potential demand revealed in this study. With up to 36 percent of the adult population expressing an interest in further education, programs designed for the part-time adult learner reach from a low of 4 percent of the population (in Planning District 11) to a high of 24 percent (in Planning District 6). A seven county rural region in west Iowa is particularly ill-served. Moreover, no area except perhaps those within commuting distance of one of the four major universities offering

graduate level study are approaching the demand for masters and professional studies on a part-time basis.

A few recent efforts are being made to improve this uneven and less than fully adequate response to these new learning needs. Several new programs are underway and program proposals have been advanced or are being discussed in Iowa's educational institutions. But the study makes clear that the older portion of the potential nontraditional learners will need counseling, information and assessment as a regular part of any educational effort. No proposal the study team has seen speaks to this important need.

Recommendations

There are six basic recommendations offered by the study team and a number of suggestions for strengthening the statewide planning and implementation of new programs, or the gradual reallocation of support from areas of diminishing need to those growing areas revealed in this study. These recommendations are designed to answer the charge given to the Office of New Degree Programs at the outset.

Policies. We recommend that every postsecondary institution in the state carefully review the needs of the nontraditional learner and consider what policies it should establish to address those needs. Not every institution may feel that its mission includes these older and largely part-time students. But many

do, and we feel that in these institutions it should be made clear to all, through the adoption of appropriate policies, that these persons are entitled to the institution's full benefits.

Balancing opportunities. We recommend that a continuing effort should be made to provide Iowa's residents an equal opportunity for further education on the basis of place of residence, occupation or age. A great opportunity and challenge exists in Iowa to provide a more equitable dispersion of existing educational resources, by a variety of existing and new delivery modes, by planning region, by program content and level, or by audience served. This effort will require much coordination, cooperation, and creativity, but can be achieved.

Expanding opportunities. We recommend that new programs designed to meet specific, identified needs of nontraditional learners should be developed. The needs and demands not covered by existing resources could be met by a variety of cooperative new structures. The precise nature of these new structures, whether offered by a single entity, a consortium, or a new resource such as the University of Mid-America should be developed by Iowa educators to fit in with the existing system and build upon its resources. The Iowa Commonwealth College proposal meets several of the objectives supported by this study, but leaves other concerns unmet. We believe that further modification of its provisions would be beneficial. Cooperation with business and industry should be an important part of new career tracks developed.

Supporting services. We recommend that provision be made to insure that all Iowa residents have appropriate access to information, counseling, assessment and evaluation, financial aid, transcript service, and other supporting services to insure that entry or reentry into postsecondary education is seen as possible and attractive. This is perhaps the most critically deficient area in Iowa's excellent educational system with respect to new learners. A fine set of services exists for the typical undergraduate, but it has only been recently realized the extent to which adults need similar assistance. We believe such support would serve the new learner best by being established outside the existing institutions.

Cooperation and coordination. We recommend that a comprehensive statewide plan for the nontraditional learner be developed cooperatively by all the relevant institutions and organizations. There are several existing coordinating committees and organizations in Iowa, but we believe that the needs in the future will make such decentralized efforts inefficient. We recommend that one agency or organization have sufficient authority and support to take a leading role in energizing these decentralized efforts and merging them into a statewide plan. An agency outside the existing segments, such as the Higher Education Facilities Commission, appears appropriate to this task.

Information system. We recommend that an effective data collection system which regularly provides the State planners with all relevant information about the conditions in the State be

established so that management decisions are made in a full information environment. Currently the state of information flow is fragmented and inadequate to the tasks outlined in this report. A larger and much more comprehensive management information system must be put in place.

Conclusions

In conclusion, the Office of New Degree Programs was asked to conduct a study of several aspects of the need and state of continuing education in Iowa. The results of that study are that the post-secondary institutions in the State are excellent, numerous, and of high quality, but heavily oriented to the traditional, full-time younger person who is embarking upon his or her career. Iowa is among the states with the lowest percent of part-time students.

In order to meet the growing need for more flexible, space and time-free study important to the further education of mature learners, major changes and innovations must take place in the next years. As the demand for full-time, on-campus study for 18 to 22 year olds steadily diminishes over the next decade, resources must be gradually reallocated to the outward orientation appropriate to a changing constituency. With sufficient planning, coordination, and support, Iowa's excellent educational resources will successfully meet this challenge and provide the high quality education characteristic of them. We are optimistic about the future. Postsecondary education need not languish in regret at lost students, but rise to the challenge of the third century, bringing the Ottumwa housewife's vision to reality.